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## SIDNEY LANIER IN FLORIDA

B y LENA

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of a sojourn in Tampa by a noted figure in the development of American literary and musical history; for Sidney Lanier, who was later to earn a high place among the poets of America, was for three months a visitor in Tampa, where several of his poems were written and others planned.

He was born in Macon, Georgia, in 1842, his branch of the Lanier family having removed from Virginia to North Carolina, thence to Georgia. The tradition that connects the Lanier family with that of George Washington has often been discredited and even his Lanier line incorrectly given, but it is now possible by recent discoveries to trace correctly the lineage of Sidney Lanier to the immigrant John Lanier, and to connect it with the Washington line. The early Laniers were forced to leave France and settle in England on account of the Huguenot persecutions. The immigrant John Lanier came to Charles City County, Virginia, in 1658. Sidney Lanier, the poet, was the seventh generation removed from John Lanier who participated in Bacon's Rebellion and whose will was probated in 1719.

Sidney Lanier, at the age of nineteen, looked forward to several years of study in a German university and then to an academic and literary career in America, but the War Between the States put an end to his dreams. After graduating from Oglethorpe University at the head of his class, Lanier entered the Confederate Army. His health was permanently impaired by his imprisonment following the War, but in spite of this and many other discouragements

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1. *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. XLIII, No. 2, April, 1935, pp. 160-168; "New Light on the Ancestry of Sidney Lanier," by Lena E. Jackson and Aubrey Starke.

of the difficult reconstruction days, during which time he taught school and practiced law, he was able to rise above bitterness and prejudice.

From his first novel, *Tiger Lilies*, published shortly after the War, Lanier received recognition as one of the promising writers of the South.

Although he died at the early age of thirty-nine years, in the midst of his career, he achieved greatness in some of his poetry and was extraordinary as a musician. By the year 1873 he became first flutist in the Peabody Symphony Orchestra of Baltimore, and one year later he met his first success as a poet with the publication of his "Corn." Lanier's passion for music is revealed in his poetry of nature and lofty aspirations, as illustrated by two of his best poems, "The Marshes of Glynn" and "Sunrise."

In the fall of 1879 Lanier received an appointment as lecturer in English literature at Johns Hopkins University, holding this position until his death in 1881. This appointment meant the achievement of a goal toward which he had been striving for many years, and also meant that at last he was to take his place as a scholar among scholars.

Lanier has often been called the Georgia poet and for years has been considered the representative poet of the South, but now he is beginning to be seen also as a national poet, whose poetry lacks the marks of sectionalism. Aubrey Harrison Starke in his recent book, *Sidney Lanier*, presents him not only as a musician, a poet, and a man of letters, but also as a man alive to the problems of his age and of his country, and a leader who worked for a united nation<sup>2</sup>.

Lanier made two trips to Florida. The first of these was in the latter part of April, 1875. Due to the necessity of earning more money and because prose

2. *Sidney Lanier*, by Aubrey Harrison Starke, Chapel Hill, N. C., 1933. p. 252.

could be made to pay when poetry could not, he accepted a commission from the Atlantic Coast Line Railway to prepare a guide book to Florida. The State was then beginning to gain popularity as a winter resort, and this work was intended to give information that would attract the tourist. The completed book was entitled *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate, and History*. Though it was essentially hack-work, quickly done, he put into it much poetry and much of himself.

It is not known just how long Lanier was in Florida at the time of his first visit, but it would appear that he remained at least during the month of May and possibly until the middle of June. At this time he made Jacksonville his headquarters, going from there to different parts of the state to gather information for his book. It is doubtful that he went as far south as Key West and Dade County, though he included brief chapters on this part of Florida. As might be expected, the chapter on historic St. Augustine is the best in the book. In other chapters he describes Jacksonville, the Ocklawaha River, the Gulf Coast, the Tallahassee Country, the St. Johns and Indian Rivers, the Lake City and Gainesville Country, West Florida, and the Everglades. He also discusses the climate, the soil, the Gulf Stream, winds and rainfall, and gives a brief history of Florida, together with an account of Charleston, Savannah, Augusta, and Aiken, and a chapter for consumptives.

Lanier's second trip to Florida in the winter of 1876-77 was made on the advice of a physician, to receive the benefit of a long rest in the sunshine and warm climate. Arrangements were made to leave the children with friends in Philadelphia, where the Laniers were staying at the time, and on the night of December 11 Lanier started on the trip to Florida, accompanied by his wife. It was a long and tiresome journey and several changes had to be made:

they traveled by rail from Philadelphia to Danville, Virginia;; by rail again to Brunswick, Georgia, where they probably visited Mrs. Lamer's father and brother; by steamer from Brunswick to Fernandina; by train again from Fernandina to Jacksonville and across the state to Cedar Keys; and from Cedar Keys to Tampa, with a stop at Manatee, by the steamer *Valley City*, of which James McKay, Sr., of Tampa was owner and his son, James McKay, Jr., was master<sup>3</sup>. The last part of the journey from Cedar Keys required thirty-six hours.

After this ten days' journey from Philadelphia, the Laniers arrived in Tampa, then only a small village of less than eight hundred inhabitants, on December 21, 1876. According to Lanier, it was "the most forlorn collection of one-story houses imaginable." They stopped at the Orange Grove Hotel, located at the corner of Madison and East streets, now used by the Seaboard Air Line Railway as the office of the Assistant Freight Traffic Manager. The structure was built before the War for a residence by William B. Hooker, but after his death it was operated as a hotel by his son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. H. L. Crane<sup>4</sup>. Lanier described it as "a large three-story house with many. odd nooks and corners, altogether clean and comfortable in appearance, and surrounded by orange-trees in full fruit." They secured a large room on the second floor, opening upon a balcony from which they could reach out and pick the golden fruit.

Lanier is said to have possessed much natural charm, and almost immediately he made new friends in Tampa. Mr. Starke writes that "the proprietor of the Orange Grove Hotel took an immediate fancy to

3. Information concerning the *Valley City* furnished by D. B. McKay of Tampa.

4. Information concerning Oran Grove Hotel furnished by Miss India Lesley, Mrs. J. D. Clark, and D. B. Givens, of Tampa.

the Laniers and sent up roses and violets from the garden, and his wife was all kindness. Mrs. C. N. Hawkins, the young wife of the editor of the *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, sent to Lanier a little jar of marmalade that had come to her in a Christmas box. To this courtesy Lanier replied with a verse, which, twice printed, has never been added to his collected poems, and which deserves to be better known than it actually is :

How oft the answers to our passing prayers  
 Drop down in forms our fancy ne'er foretold!  
 -Thus when of late, consumed by wasting cares,  
 "Angels preserve us" from my lips up-rolled,  
 I'm sure I pictured not-as thus I prayed-  
 Angels preserving me-with marmalade!!!!

The point of the verse, like the point of most of Lanier's attempts at humor, is a pun, but the verse is graceful and it supplements the impression that the letters give us of a very cheerful invalid who, as he tells us more seriously in 'The Stirrup Cup,' written some time during the Tampa sojourn, would face even death with a smile."<sup>5</sup>

As his health improved, Lanier took daily rides on "a shaggy gray mare" through the "great pine forests" that surrounded Tampa and began to compose poems. In a letter he wrote at this time, "In truth, I 'bubble song'."<sup>6</sup> At least eleven poems seem to have been written or planned during the three months that Lanier spent in Florida, seven appearing in print almost immediately. Among these poems are: "The Bee," "Tampa Robins," "From the Flats," and "A Florida Sunday." The poem, "The Bee," suggests not only the idealism of Lanier, but also Florida's summer in winter. Lanier is said to have dedicated

5. *Sidney Lanier*, by Aubrey Harrison Starke. pp. 266-67.

6. *Ibid.* p. 267. Also *Sidney Lanier*, by Edwin Mims, New York, 1905. p. 195.

"Tampa Robins to Clara Virginia Givens, a young lady who was often a visitor at the Orange Grove Hotel <sup>7</sup>.

It is said that during the Tampa visit the Laniers made a trip to Wauchula, traveling by ox-cart. For the benefit of his health they camped in a tent in the pine forest near two lakes for about a month <sup>8</sup>.

Edwin Mims, in his biography of the poet, considers the letters written in Florida among Lanier's best. Here he wrote:

"What would I not give to transport you from your frozen sorrows instantly into the midst of the green leaves, the gold oranges, the glitter of great and tranquil waters, the liberal friendship of the sun, the heavenly conversation of robins and mocking-birds and larks, which fill my days with delight <sup>9</sup>."

During their stay in Tampa Mr. and Mrs. Lanier were welcomed into the Nickel Club, of which Mrs. H. L. Crane was president and Miss Fannie Givens, later the wife of R. B. Thomas, was secretary. It was a literary and musical organization which met once a week, usually at the Orange Grove Hotel, and probably derived its name from the fact that members paid dues of five cents at each meeting <sup>10</sup>. Mr. Lanier often played the flute at these meetings, accompanied by his wife at the piano.

An item from an old newspaper, the Tampa *Sunland Tribune*, dated March 17, 1877, gives an account of one of the meetings of the Nickel Club, a part of which is as follows:

7. Information from D. B. Givens, of Tampa, who stated that he and his sisters, Clara Virginia and Fannie (later the wife of R. B. Thomas), were often visitors at the Orange Grove Hotel at that time and knew the Laniers.

8. Information from D. B. Givens.

9. *Sidney Lanier*, by Edwin Mims, p. 195.

10. Information concerning the Nickel Club was furnished by D. B. Givens. Miss India Lesley and Mrs. J. D. Clark also remember the Nickel Club.

"We regret that a want of space will prevent us from noticing, at length, the last entertainment given by the Nickel Club. We regret it all the more on account of its having presented features of special interest. The meeting being held at the Orange Grove Hotel, rendered it convenient for Mr. Sidney Lanier, who is stopping there for his health, to contribute something to our efforts, which he very kindly consented to do. It is generally known that Mr. Lanier is perhaps the finest flutist of the South, as well as a rising poet of America-already taking rank with the famous writers of the age. Mr. Lanier appeared with his flute and gave us a treat that will certainly be long remembered by the audience."

In the issue of March 24, 1877, of the same publication is an account of another meeting of the Nickel Club, with special tribute to Mr. Zanier as a musician:

"The last meeting of the Nickel Club was well attended and received a liberal encouragement in every way. . . Mr. Lanier favored us with another Flute Solo "Blue Bells of Scotland" with variations. It has never been our good fortune to meet with any individual before who could get so much music out of a flute as he can. The Club has reason to feel very grateful to Mr. Lanier for contributing thus to its efforts, while his strength is surely not sufficient to render it quite easy for him to do so. We would feel justified in speaking of these . . . performances at much greater length, but as they should have been heard in order to be appreciated, we deem it useless to say more here."

The *Sunland Tribune* of April 7, 1877, mentions the departure of "Mr. Lanier and Lady" on the *Cochran* and states further that "They leave many warm friends behind them, and they will be sadly missed in the community."